

# From Draftsmanship to Depiction

Interview with Tim Gardner and Stephen Waddell

We invited Vancouver photographer Stephen Waddell to interview Tim Gardner with an understanding that the relationship between their work might not be immediately apparent: Waddell works in large-scale photographs and Gardner works in the more intimate scale of watercolour. By initiating this conversation we hoped to draw out questions that consider the unique relationship between photography and painting, in particular, in light of both Waddell's and Gardner's interest in figurative painting and its relation to the landscape.

**SW:** Tim, let's start. Tell me what influenced you as a young artist and when did you start taking your painting seriously.

**TG:** Okay, I guess my first influence was in high school art class looking through the art books and I was struck by a painting by Eric Fischl, *Sleepwalker* (1979) (figure 30), I think it's called. The boy is standing in the kiddie pool, I think he's masturbating. That opened my eyes to what was possible in terms of painting and drawing pictures. I'd always been drawing before that but that was something new to me. I guess that sort of got me going on the path to wanting to be an artist.

**SW:** How old were you at that time?

**TG:** Probably about seventeen or so.

**SW:** And so I guess that comes to my next question; in a sense you could say that you always wanted to be a figurative painter?

**TG:** From that point on I was mainly interested in making figurative work.

**SW:** What's interesting about Fischl, or at least his early pictures, is that he confronted us with narratives, the history of painting. And it was figurative and that meant something at the time. Still means something now, but it's different now. But that was the first kind of art that struck you?

**TG:** Yeah. I guess it was just a matter of identifying with the subject matter, the depicted person in the painting, that led me to the kind of art I was making when I started to get serious about it—which was the pictures of my older brother and his friends partying. That was the first major body of work that I did. That came out of wanting to connect with someone, or a way of painting friends for myself to hang out with. That sounds kind of sad, but that's how it began. From there I developed an interest in masculine archetypes, which continues now. This interest has informed other influences as well. I looked back at Velásquez and Manet, Sergeant, and those kinds of figurative painters. And the whole tradition that leads up to Fischl and Attila Richard Lukacs. So I became very interested in that whole lineage, in oil painting on a grand scale. That carried through my university years. When I got to New York I started to experience some of those paintings first-hand and that sort of changed my relationship to them. I think it's because the way I was learning initially was through textbooks, so I was looking at these figurative paintings but in four by six inch size, so I guess I didn't really understand the scale of them. Once I got to New York I made an effort to seek out Attila Richard Lukacs and I started working for him; actually, I spent two years working in his studio. I was also being encouraged to look at the popular figurative painters at that time like John Currin, Richard Phillips and Lisa Yuskavage.

**SW:** So when you began as a figurative painter you opted to use those sources—you opted to use photography, and not paint from a model—not to seek out older ways of working and observation. And that is now irrefutably part of painting I would say. And so in a sense, all of those painters in New York that you mentioned were borrowing from the Richter model of painting from photographs. Was that something you thought about?

**TG:** Looking at Richter and the photo-based aspect of painting that contains the permission part of it—that permission opened up and said it was okay to paint from photography. I never really thought about it too much until recently. The whole idea of projecting images on the canvas and going from there leaves out an important aspect of painting, the drawing part of it. I see it as a fundamental aspect of painting. So when I was projecting images on the canvas and painting them I guess I just wasn't always satisfied with the process.

**SW:** The idea of “permission” is interesting. It seems that you started without doubting the Richter model but what happened once you did?

**TG:** Well I think what happened with me was that I was constantly hearing about this oil painting lineage that I was a part of, but I wasn't necessarily that interested in it anymore. And I ended up in my second year of grad school going home for vacation and just doing watercolours, because it seemed natural and accessible at the time.

**SW:** So you're doing oil paintings at school?

**TG:** Yeah. Fairly large-scale paintings.

**SW:** With subjects that relate to what you're doing now?

**TG:** The subject matter was similar to my earliest watercolours, with single figures and groups of figures against a dark background. They were influenced by the paintings of Francisco Zurbarán.

**SW:** Although they were large in scale, you were staying close to the snapshot?

**TG:** Yes, definitely photo-based, with a real emphasis on the photographic flash quality. And that's something that continued when I started doing watercolour, but the switch of medium was important for me. It was like making a sharp right turn to get out of the oil painting lineage.

**SW:** Most people would have started with watercolour as a way to sketch. But for you watercolour came as the next step?

**TG:** Yeah. I just started with large-scale oil paintings and later shifted to watercolour, but as a primary medium.

**SW:** And you started with projections?

**TG:** Yes, without any kind of training I was making these paintings that referenced old master works, but the process was totally different. It involved projecting the image and blocking in areas of colour for the under-painting and then filling them in one at a time, rather than building up the paint. I would finish each area with very little reworking, basically a similar process to watercolour. So then when I started using watercolour, it made more sense to me and I had a greater affinity with it. In the context of grad school in New York, the switch to watercolour provided a bit of freedom as well because there was no obvious precedent to follow and less of a recent lineage.

**SW:** It's almost like you're saying that in oil you couldn't get the effects that you wanted for the subjects you had at hand?

- TG:** I definitely had more facility with watercolour. So I had no problem painting these pictures that I was kind of struggling with in oil, and I could start to paint more things, like landscapes for instance.
- SW:** Was it the ephemerality of watercolour?
- TG:** Yes, but also there was a difference between painting the partying guys on a large scale in oil, versus painting them in watercolour at snapshot size. So bringing it down to an intimate scale was and is something really appealing. I guess getting away from the seriousness of oil painting and using a secondary medium that people have described as a hobbyist medium creates a different tension in the work, which is more approachable. The larger scale paintings were just intimidating to look at, which wasn't what I was going for.
- SW:** So you're working through sources, as you have described, and watercolour offered brevity and a more open strategy for you than oil painting. So how did your subject matter differ once you began the shift to watercolour?
- TG:** In the beginning I was using basically the same subject matter. Soon after that, I started incorporating landscape. That's where some technical difficulties had arisen for me when I was painting in oil. Initially I was making large oil paintings of single figures against black backgrounds that didn't take very long to finish. Then, painting large landscapes required more time than I felt necessary. I was then more interested in moving through these images and ideas at a faster pace. So watercolour offered me a way of working faster, and smaller in scale.
- SW:** Yes, I see how that shift to watercolour and reducing scale worked to speed some things up. I see the smaller scale as having maintained that relationship to larger figurative influences. Do you think that has to do with how they were made?

**TG:** The first watercolours were of similar imagery, basically the same subject matter. There were figures on dark backgrounds, they were like night scenes of people on tracks and the like; and then when I started to incorporate landscape it really opened up and really changed the way I was painting and thinking about it.

**SW:** In what way?

**TG:** It changed who I was looking at for one thing. That meant I stopped looking at Velásquez and all those kind of figurative painters as much, and more at landscape-based painters working on a more intimate scale, like Casper David Friedrich, and a Russian painter named Nicholas Roerich. I started thinking more about the relation of the figure to the landscape—what that meant, in terms of the subject, how people had depicted it before, and how I was thinking about it now.

**SW:** Your CAG exhibition has a lot to do with landscape?

**TG:** Yes, this exhibition is primarily about the figure in the landscape. I wanted to make works that have a bit of a tension, using symbolism and elements of light compositionally. I'm trying to contrast the sublime and the banal to illustrate what I see as sort of an awkward relationship between the figure and the natural landscape.

**SW:** That awkwardness is present in your older work as well?

**TG:** I think it has to do with my relationship to the figure in the painting. There is a judgement going on, and at the same time, there is affection.

**SW:** But your pictures are more beautiful and say more about the artist's gaze than they say in judgement of the subject.

**TG:** There is a sort of twisted affection, especially when the picture depicts more of a portrait.

**SW:** *Untitled (Hot Tub)* (2009) (figure 27) I find very interesting. I understand that the depiction of the flash is present like your older work, but it speaks to the awkward, and it's a landscape. I am drawn to the sinister tub cover and the light through the trees.

**TG:** This one ties back more closely to the earlier work in terms of the confrontational aspect of the figure and also the photographic language of the flash. It seems the more banal the image, the more biting my relationship to the figure becomes. As a self portrait, it becomes more self-implicating.

**SW:** *Untitled (Nick and Holly)* (2008) (figure 28) along with *Untitled (Tobi in the Landscape)* (2006) seem to be constructed on observation and less on the photographic. Is that true?

**TG:** They are based on photos but have less of the photographic language, like the flash or severe cropping, that is present in other works.

**SW:** How do you see the difference between landscapes with or without figures?

**TG:** The figure seen from the rear goes back to Friedrich, traditional and contemplative. The *Nick and Holly* image contains the people coming towards the viewer. This is more about just being. Usually for me it is about using the figure to project myself into the scene, like the figure decked out in Converse, in *Untitled (Boy on Beach)* (2009) (figure 29). If no figure is present then the significance of that place becomes heightened. There are always elements that create tension, like a road or a swath through the landscape, some hindrance to direct, easy contemplation.

**SW:** How does photography enter your work?



- TG:** Basically I'm using photography as a tool for source material. I mean I'm always taking pictures.
- SW:** So you do make your own sources?
- TG:** Yes, I take a lot of pictures and I have an archive of images. In the beginning I was borrowing pictures from my brother and his friends. Gradually I started working more from my own source material.
- SW:** Do your photographs relate more to observations or memories?
- TG:** When I'm taking the photographs it is more about recording the place or event. Over time the element of memory seeps in.
- SW:** Do you think about framing or composition?
- TG:** Not really, no. I usually take a few pictures of a scene and think about the composition later when I begin a painting.
- SW:** How did you decide which photographs would become paintings?
- TG:** I begin by looking through the archive of photographs and images will sort of come to the surface and gradually fill my desktop, but no method really.
- SW:** But you must have some aesthetic criteria for why some picture might become a painting?
- TG:** It becomes a matter of picking out elements from certain images.
- SW:** Could it just be about light or colour?
- TG:** Well kind of. Or they could get separated by format, like still-life or landscape or figuration.
- SW:** Could it ever be that one photographic source appears to contain the potential forms of a painting better than another?



**TG:** I guess that's how they end up in that sort of short list. When I'm out taking pictures I might be convinced that the pictures will end up in a painting and then later I find that they're not suitable at all. And then other images will just kind of come out of nowhere, like from certain family events or something.

**SW:** From the archive?

**TG:** Yes, all of the sudden I'll have an interest in an image and it will kind of resonate with me.

**SW:** Does the archive matter to you?

**TG:** How do you mean?

**SW:** If it was to disappear tomorrow would it matter?

**TG:** Not really.

**SW:** So it's not an atlas.

**TG:** No, it can be built up again over time. Aside from family pictures I mean, which are valuable in a different way.

**SW:** Sentimental you mean?

**TG:** Yes.

**SW:** For instance, Luc Tuymans just gave a group of his Polaroids to a museum. How do you see that act?

**TG:** In terms of the attachment of meaning to those source materials?

**SW:** Yes, earlier on in the conversation I said, and I'm not sure if you agree with me, but in some way the source has to die. Do you see any significance in keeping the sources for the pictures that you paint?

**TG:** Not really. I mean, during the process of painting it becomes about this attachment to the image, but it ends afterwards. The source image either goes back into the archive, or regains its value as a family photo or it's just discarded.

**SW:** Gerhard Richter would say that the painting is always better.  
Would you agree?

**TG:** Yes.

**SW:** So once you have chosen a snapshot, how long does it normally take for you to finish a painting?

**TG:** Anywhere from a day to a couple of weeks.

**SW:** In that time then, memory and experience are informing the picture as much as the source?

**TG:** Right. Memory creates a personal connection to the subject or the time or place that I'm depicting. And the important thing for me is the transformation that happens when the photograph is rendered in paint. A certain degree of affection is applied over time.

**SW:** Do you work on more than one picture at a time?

**TG:** No. Once I start a painting I'm focused on the one image until it's done.

**SW:** How do you transform your sources in paint?

**TG:** I'll do all sorts of things.

**SW:** Alterations that have nothing to do with the actual photograph?

**TG:** Yes and a lot of my watercolours will end up being composite images of a bunch of different photographs. So for me photography is all about compiling source material, kind of like sketching.

**SW:** Would you ever make a photo collage sketch?

**TG:** Some of my earlier watercolours were representations of the photograph, where I made a collage and traced or projected out that image. Lately I've stopped doing that and gotten more into just drawing it. That's become important to me.

**SW:** So if you want to do a faithful recording of the photograph you will draw it freehand rather than project it?

- TG:** Yes that's what I do now.
- SW:** And so you have the collage in your mind, so to speak?
- TG:** Right.
- SW:** That's interesting.
- SW:** So this permission to use a photographic source, projection notwithstanding, is something you're trying to evolve or move away from?
- TG:** I've become more interested in the challenge that drawing brings to the process, which makes it more interesting. I don't think it changes the look of the final picture much though.
- SW:** But it adds distortions doesn't it?
- TG:** It can, but I think the difference is subtle. Artists will unknowingly distort in different ways. It's a different kind of distortion than the lens. Also, drawing by hand slows down the process for me and opens up possibilities in terms of composition. If we look at the watercolour of the people looking at the Manet painting (figure 31) for example, I don't think you could ever photograph that scene in real life. The relationship of all the elements, like the people's heads to the picture frames, is too perfect to be a snapshot.
- SW:** Is that picture collaged?
- TG:** It's drawn from a few different photographs of the same scene. There were more figures in the photos.
- SW:** But when you're there and you're making the photograph, are you already putting that picture together in your head or is that a process that happens in studio?

- TG:** Thinking back to that scene in particular, I saw the main figure and thought eventually he might show up in a painting but not necessarily in that same setting. It took about five years for the image to resurface in the archive and then I did end up using the entire scene but with some reworking compositionally.
- SW:** Do you see a difference between works that faithfully record a source and those that are collaged together?
- TG:** Only in terms of the amount of work added to the process. Once an image is composed from multiple sources it carries the same significance to me as a single source.
- SW:** We have been talking about this lineage of figurative art, described by Baudelaire, manifested in the Gerhard Richter model, where the source itself must die in order for the artwork to exist. Is that how you use photography?
- TG:** Yes. And I don't really see myself getting serious about photography. I see the whole process of drawing as a way of beginning to distance myself from the Richter model I think.
- SW:** But that would lead to more pictures that do not represent flash, that do not represent lens distortions, that do not resemble all the marks of amateur photography.
- TG:** Which leads to *plein-air* sketching—and I wouldn't rule that out either.
- SW:** At a certain point do you think you will just not use sources anymore?
- TG:** I'll probably always use source material because of the importance of memory and experience that I attach to the photographs. So in a way I'm torn between the Richter model and I don't know what you want to call the other but ...
- SW:** That's naturalism. However, photography or the using of lens-based aids by painters is a very old procedure.

- TG:** Using watercolour and looking at watercolour painters has made me want to move away from the photograph somewhat.
- SW:** Which watercolour painters are those?
- TG:** Sergeant's watercolours made a big impression on me. Or someone like Stewart Marshall—painters who have a real sense of immediacy, which is something I skipped when I began making figurative oil paintings.
- SW:** What is the importance of drawing?
- TG:** Well there's been a reliance on the machine, the projector, which has sort of bothered me more and more. So replacing it with drawing is something that satisfies the urge to get away from the mechanical while still relying on photographic sources.
- SW:** This is a subject that painters don't want to talk about much.
- TG:** I know.
- SW:** Bacon would talk about the photographs on the floor of his studio, and how images got incorporated into his artworks emotionally, practically and aesthetically. So what does projecting prevent?
- TG:** I think there is an element of risk missing with projection because the work is basically pre-made. For me it's about knowing that there is chance and skill in the work and the feeling of accomplishment that goes with working on anything intensely for a length of time. The handmade aspect brings a certain energy to the work which projection negates. For some viewers it may not make a difference, but in looking at drawing, you are basically witnessing the artist's voice and that makes the experience very intimate.